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LOOKING AT THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
ON STUDENT LEARNING

by
Carly H. Oliver

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Science in Teaching Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
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Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved July 1, 2004

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ABSTRACT

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LOOKING AT THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT
ON STUDENT LEARNING
2003/04
Dr. Marjorie Madden
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This qualitative study focuses on parental involvement in schools, in particular, the over involvement of some parents. Major themes covered include parent-teacher communication, appropriate involvement in and out of the classroom, and parental interference. Research was conducted by surveying two hundred fifty parents and sixty teachers in one elementary school in conjunction with follow-up interviews and the researcher's field notes. The response rates were low and respondents may share many characteristics, skewing the results. Questions on the surveys were categorized into themes to look for trends. The results find that some parents do interfere with the educational process and children of these parents tend to suffer negative consequences. The data also shows that parents are interested in participating in the classroom. Recommendations for further research are presented.

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Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

Introduction

“Here girls, listen to this voicemail message.”

We knew who it was before she told us and wondered what she could possibly want this time.

“Hi, Mrs. T. It’s Mrs. V. and I was wondering if you could give Jacob some extra homework tonight? He did an hour of homework last night but his father and I don’t think it was enough. Oh, and do you think you could teach that lesson on subtraction again? I don’t think he ‘got’ it.”

“Can you believe this woman? I can’t *reteach* that lesson! I have to move on. And I already have to spend most of my planning time photocopying all of his assessments for her.”

At that time, Jacob and the rest of this third grade, resource center class walked in for their math lesson. Jacob sat down and immediately began looking at a schedule in his folder, then looking at the clock and back at the schedule. All of the other kids were working on their seatwork like they were supposed to.

“Is something wrong, Jacob?” Mrs. T. asked in a concerned yet, hesitant voice.

“I...I...I think I have to be at speech now, Mrs. T.” Jacob was shaking slightly and looked like he might faint any minute. “My mom made me a schedule to keep in my folder, and I think I have to be at speech.”

We take a look at the schedule made by mom, and the master copy my cooperating teacher keeps at her desk.

“Relax, Jacob. Speech is on Tuesday, today is Thursday.”

The rest of the class goes on as usual, with Jacob checking and rechecking his work to make sure it is perfect. The stress revealed in his body language makes us all feel for him as we see the effects of his mother’s requests.

As the class is leaving to return to their regular class, we all see the same thing. The red light on the phone was blinking again.

“Oh no, not again!”

Purpose, Rationale, and Problem

One of my main areas of interest in education is that of parents’ involvement in schools and in their children’s education. There are many aspects of parental involvement to explore, but there is one in particular that I would like to learn more about: *Is it possible for some parents to be too involved in their child’s education, and if so, what happens to the child?*

Although I am an advocate for active participation from parents, I believe that there exists a fine line that may be crossed by particular parents. Teachers often wonder why a particular student behaves the way he or she does. Many times, upon meeting the parents, teachers can see the behavioral tendencies and family values passed on from parents to their children. There are some parents who never come into the school and who seem to be absent from all interactions with their children in relation to school and homework (Lawson, 2003). On the other extreme, there are those parents who write notes, or call the teacher or school on a daily basis (2003).

In an ideal situation, parents and teachers communicate on an as-needed basis, both for positive and negative issues. Teachers and parents should feel comfortable initiating contact and expect timely responses. So what is too much involvement? Although left to the perceptions of the individual, behaviors of overly involved parents can range from being a constant presence in the classroom, to daily notes to the teacher, to harassing phone calls several times a day, to the point that communication must be cut off completely (Cassanova, 1996; Lawson, 2003). Furthermore, the responsibility of guiding appropriate parent involvement often rests predominantly on the classroom teacher.

In my experiences, as well as in the research (Norton & Nufeld, 2002), the intentions of overly involved parents are generally in the best interest of the child but can this behavior affect the child in a negative way?

Methods

The following study was conducted primarily through surveys to parents and teachers in a school in a suburban, upper-middle class, primarily Caucasian, New Jersey town where cultural diversity is low. Some of the survey participants agreed to follow-up interviews and I kept a reflective journal during eight weeks at the start of the 2003-2004 school year. Consequently, the data is triangulated through surveys, interviews, and field notes in an attempt to arrive at valid and generalizable results. Data analysis is reported as a narrative and will be descriptive, looking for patterns or themes across data sources. The final report will be a descriptive narrative in the qualitative research tradition.

Limitations

Due to the relatively small sample being surveyed, the results of this study are not generalizable. All subjects surveyed live in relatively close proximity to the school. The number of respondents for both teachers and parents are low, however the ratios of responses are nearly equal to each other, corroborating the opinions of parents and teachers.

Organization of Study

This thesis begins with an overview of the problem in chapter one and a review of the current literature on parental involvement in chapter two. Chapter three outlines the methodology used to conduct the study including a description of the context and survey response statistics. Chapter four is a report of the results of the surveys, and follow-up interviews. Finally, chapter five is a discussion of the findings and their implications.

Chapter Two

Background of the Study

Literature Review

This paper will address parental involvement of both general education and special education students in grades one through five in one elementary school. Parental involvement is required in the education of children with special needs but is recommended for all students in order to maintain school expectations outside of the school setting (Singh, 2003). The following is a review of the current research on parent-teacher communication. It is organized to show the positive and negative aspects of parental involvement.

Positive Aspects of Parental Involvement

As found in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA: PL 105-17), parental involvement is mandated in the special education decision making process in relation to their child. Students with disabilities must have an individualized education plan (IEP) and the parents are required to give consent and sign all paperwork (Singh, 2003). Ulrich and Bauer (2003) note that “communication between parents of children with disabilities and educational professionals is not only mandated but is best practice.” Aside from students with special needs, parents of general education students are encouraged to become involved in their child’s education. According to Sui-Chu and Willms (2000), parents can do much to be involved in their child’s schooling such as discussions at home between parents and students about what happened in school and what homework they

have. Parents need to supervise their children when at home to ensure that they are completing all out-of-school assignments. Communication between parents and teachers is very important in order for both to get a full understanding of the child's personality, behavior, and academic performance while in school and in the home. Research has also found that many children appear to have varying personalities in the two different settings (Sui-Chu & Willms, 2000). Lastly, parents should participate in school organizations and activities, such as parent-teacher organizations (PTO's) to better understand the structure and organization of the school (2000).

Delar K. Singh (2003), conducted research to find out what kinds of home-school communication mothers of students with disabilities desired. He found that the majority of these mothers wanted daily communication in the form of a written daily log. Fewer parents wanted weekly communication via a phone call. The least common response was monthly contact through a face to face conference. Mothers want to be informed about both academic and behavioral performance and wanted to know whether or not their child had a good day or a bad day (2003).

Research has shown that parent involvement enhances student academic achievements and learning experiences (e.g. Carr & Wilson, 1997; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Lawson, 2003; Smith, 2002). Parents, students, and teachers each have their own opinions on what is considered appropriate involvement from parents in relation to the education of their children. Barge and Loges (2003) interviewed parents, students, and teachers to gain an understanding of the most effective ways that parent involvement can increase academic and behavioral success. Findings indicate that parents must be able to monitor homework assignments as well as "academic progress." This can be achieved

through report cards, since report cards are sent home to the parents and require a parent signature upon return, and school-wide assignment books where the students write down their daily homework assignments. Communication between parents and teachers also becomes critical. Secondly, parents want schools to know that they are involved in their child's life and forming a partnership with the teacher makes it easier for both to share information about that student. Progress reports, parent-teacher conferences and voicemail make it easy for the parents and teachers to stay in touch. Parents also want to hear positive comments, not only negative, as many parents are accustomed to. Thirdly, parents can become involved in extracurricular activities and programs. Parents can provide academic support, and be appropriate adult role models. Fourth, parents feel a strong need to have school community support that can be defined as parent-parent support. Children will typically remain with the same group of students throughout their years of schooling meaning the parents of those children will come into contact many times throughout the years. Because of this, parents need to create supports for each other and share with each other. The most common form of parent to parent support is a parent-teacher organization (PTO). Some parents also feel that they should be a part of the curriculum making (Barge & Loges, 2003).

Further research (Barge & Loges, 2003) focuses on students' perceptions of parental involvement. Students feel that help with homework, meaning checking to make sure assignments are done on time and aid with skills that are too hard, is the most vital part of parental involvement, and the most helpful. Receiving encouragement is another important part. This ties back to the parents wanting to hear positive remarks as well as negative remarks about their children. If they hear more positive comments from the

teachers, then they can praise their children at home. Lastly, students feel that their parents need to interact with the school but walk the thin line of being involved without being embarrassing. The least helpful forms of involvement were identified as lack of communication between parent and student, and the failure to interact with the school, or neglect (2003).

Barge and Loges conclude their study with a report on the teachers' views on parental involvement. According to teachers, the most helpful forms of involvement are 1) communication between parents and students, just to show an interest; 2) participation, or helping with homework; supervision/parenting, providing proper nutrition or monitoring homework assignments to make sure they are all completed; and 3) discipline, parents supporting punishments at home. Some forms of involvement that hinder student learning are 1) negative communication, and failure to motivate a positive attitude or demeaning a student; 2) lack of support or absence of communication; 3) and bad parenting skills or lack of proper discipline (2003). This study identified many ways to involve parents but almost each one of these things can turn from a positive to a negative if the parent goes over the line and becomes too involved and controlling in their child's education.

Negative Aspects of Parental Involvement

Due to work-related priorities, lack of time, or other various reasons, many parents do not take the time to be involved in their children's education (Sarason and Lightfoot as cited in Feurstein, 2000). Teachers strive to think of ways to increase the communication between home and school in order to carry over the knowledge and values taught in school to the rest of the students' lives. Since the 1970's, teachers have

been struggling to encourage parental involvement. This involvement is greatly desired because both parents and their children are affected by all school decisions. There are a few things that have been done in order to encourage participation from parents in school related aspects of life. Feurstein suggests some other ways to promote teacher/parent interaction such as adding additional planning time when teachers can call or email parents. He also reported that in California, “schools have the opportunity to use state money for overtime spent visiting students’ families” (Feurstein, 2000).

Ideally, all parents would be appropriately involved in their child’s education by actively participating in all of the methods mentioned above. However, various factors influence the availability of the parents as well as the degree of participation from parents. Ethnicity, family composition, and socio-economic status all affect the level of participation from parents in schools (Feurstein, 2000). Ethnicity of both families and teachers are contributing factors in the degree of involvement due to differing cultures. Family composition refers to the number and age of siblings and parents as well as the relationship to primary caretakers. Socio-economic status can greatly affect the amount of time a parent may be able to spend involved in their child’s education. Feurstein describes the five areas that he considers to be variables when it comes to parental involvement:

- (a) The amount of time that students speak with their parents, (b) the amount of time that parents volunteer at school, (c) the expectations that parents have for their children, (d) the amount of time that parents involve themselves in the PTO, and (e) the degree to which parents involve themselves in grade-placement decisions for their children (2000).

Time, expectations, and degree of involvement are the major identifying factors in the appropriateness of parental involvement.

Ulrich and Bauer (2003) argue that teachers of both general education and students with special needs encourage parental involvement, however, the latter's participation is mandated by IDEA resulting in a higher percentage of parents having regular interaction with the school and the teachers. Parents of children with special needs are encouraged to take an active role and ask for clarifications. Nevertheless, many of these parents are not aware of how to be an appropriately involved parent. This is due mostly to the parents' lack of awareness about disabilities. "Parents who typically have very little experience with disabilities when they were growing up, may have little or no real information about mild disabilities, such as learning disabilities" (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003). Parents need to become informed about their child's disability to know how to handle both academics and behavior (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003). After parents become aware of what is available to their child, they "want specific services with specific numbers of individualized education programs (IEPs)...Parents may even be confrontational, wanting to know what the professionals are going to do...Parents may argue for a reduction of requirements" (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003). Although awareness is important, as with anything, some people will take it too far. Ulrich & Bauer (2003) also say that "parents recognize that children with disabilities need supports; and not only do they need supports, but they may have their own perspectives on how these needs should be met. The solution is not an easy one since by law, schools have to meet the demands of parents of children with disabilities. When parents, who are not professional educators, do not trust the opinions of those who work with their child on a daily basis, a power struggle usually follows and the student is the one who is losing out (2003).

Norton and Nufeld (2002) report that students can gain more academic success, an enhanced trust of the professional educators from parents, and a more effective collaboration for problem solving if parents communicate with the teachers. However, “some concern has been expressed regarding the involvement of parents who become active primarily to look after their own personal interests such as a special program that benefits their child or to invoke their personal biases about school curriculum or budget allocations” (2002). There is also a concern among educators about “excessive parental involvement in those professional school activities in which their intentions and/or qualifications are questionable” (Casanova as cited in Norton & Nufeld, 2002). Norton and Nufeld term this as “parental interference” and go as far as to say “excessive parent involvement and/or ever-present parents may be detrimental to positive outcomes” (2002).

Summary of the Literature

The issues of parental participation begin with wanting to increase involvement and communication. Parents of special education students are required by law to be involved in the educational process but it is strongly encouraged for all students (Singh, 2003). All parents need to be educated on appropriate ways to be involved in the educational setting (Ulrich & Bauer, 2003). The research explains what is considered desirable parental involvement, including report cards, progress reports, parent-teacher conferences, voicemail, PTO's, homework help, positive reinforcement, and discipline (Barge & Loges, 2003). Many families are not provided accessibility to schools and classrooms or have other survival priorities to attend to (Feurstein, 2000). But there are still many things parents can do to override the authority held by the teacher (Norton &

Nufeld, 2002). However, very little research has been done on what is considered too much involvement and the effects that over-involvement has on the students who suffer from controlling parents. *What is considered too much parental involvement and what are the effects on students in reference to their educational success?*

Chapter Three

Methodology

Context of the Study

I gathered data on the current level of parental involvement from the parents of fifth and second grade students, and all of the teachers in first through fifth grades in a suburban area of New Jersey. It is a township of almost fifty thousand people, with 90.2% white and a median income of \$66,500. This particular school has approximately eight hundred students in grades one through five, nine resource centers, one self-contained class, and a professional staff of sixty.

Research Design

Since the data collection is triangulated through surveys, interviews, and field notes to gain valid and generalizable results, and data analysis coincides with that to be reported as a narrative, this report is qualitative. The report of the results will be descriptive and will look for patterns or themes

Data Sources

For data collection, I distributed anonymous surveys, with the option for additional confidential phone or email interviews, to parents of students, and teachers. The questions on the parent survey are open-ended, focusing on the amount of and quality of parental involvement as well as which methods of communication work successfully. See Figure 1 for list of questions. The teachers' surveys contain questions regarding their opinions on successful forms of communication and traits of parents who

Figure 2

Teacher Survey

Grade

Class Type (general education, inclusion, resource center)

Current # of Students

Current # of Students with IEPs

Types of Disabilities Served

of Years Teaching Experience

1. In your opinion, is parental involvement important in students' education?
2. What techniques do you currently use as means of communication with parents?
3. Which techniques seem to be the most effective in obtaining appropriate teacher/parent interaction?
4. In your opinion, what are characteristics of appropriate parental involvement?
5. Have you ever had a parent(s) call, email, write notes, or request conferences on a daily, or almost daily basis? Was this behavior a problem?
6. Have you ever had a parent of a student who you would have considered to be *too involved*?
7. What actions did this parent take that you might interpret as *too involved*?
8. In your opinion, what kinds of consequences do these behaviors have on the children?
9. Please add any experiences or further information about parental involvement that you would like to share that might be useful in this research. Use a separate sheet of paper if necessary.
10. Would you be interested in participating in additional phone, email, or in person interviews?

Those respondents who agreed to being interviewed further were asked for information regarding the topics of focus. The following survey was given to eleven parents and four teachers who participated in the follow-up telephone interview or email

survey. The interviews were structured and respondents answered open-ended questions. See Figure 3 for the survey questions.

Figure 3

Parent and Teacher Follow-up Surveys

Parents

1. Are you employed?
2. What topics do you contact the teacher about?
3. What topics does the teacher contact you about?
4. In your opinion, are the topics more often positive or negative subjects?
5. On average, how long does contact regarding a single topic with the teacher last?
6. Does your child's teacher invite you into the classroom to aid in activities or parties? If yes, do you participate? If no, would you like him or her to?
7. Finally, what are your general thoughts on parental involvement?

Teachers

1. What topics do you contact parents about?
2. What topics do parents contact you about?
3. In your opinion, are the topics more often positive or negative subjects?
4. Do you invite your students' parents into the classroom to aid in activities or parties? If so, do they participate? If not, why not?
5. On average, how long does contact last with a parent regarding a single issue?
6. How often do you have parents that you would consider as "interference" with your daily duties as a teacher?
7. What kind of requests do they make that interfere, and how frequently do they have these requests?
8. Finally, what are your general thoughts on parental involvement?

I sent out two hundred fifty surveys to parents of second and fifth grade students and sixty to each professional staff member. I received twenty-three parent surveys and six teacher surveys making my return rates 9.2% and 10% respectively. Additionally, twelve out of the twenty-three parents and four of the six teacher respondents took a second survey or interview. This makes the secondary return rates 52% and 66% respectively. The emailed follow-up interviews are confidential and a printed version has been kept in my files. I kept notes in a journal during phone interviews. My third source is a reflective journal I kept for eight weeks during an internship in the school with a resource center teacher. In order to analyze data, I charted individual or similar survey questions to look for themes among respondents.

Limitations

Since only 10% of the surveys sent out were returned, the results of this study will be greatly affected. There is no obvious explanation for the poor return rate, but those who did respond probably share certain similarities that will skew the results. I propose that most of the parents who took the time to respond to this survey are parents who participate in their child's education.

Time constraints are another limitation to this study. Done as a Master's Thesis in conjunction with student teaching requirements, time to complete the study was limited. Given more time, more effective survey questions could have been developed as well as distributing more surveys, possibly in multiple settings. This would allow for more varied responses.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

Parental involvement in education is a necessity. However, some parents become overinvolved and actually interfere with the educational process by being a constant presence in the classroom, either physically or by numerous special requests. Although intentions are usually good, it may seem at time that overinvolved parents are only out to help themselves. The reason for this study is to investigate parental involvement as seen by parents and teachers in an elementary school in New Jersey. They were surveyed about methods of communication and characteristics of appropriately involved parents and overly involved parents.

In this chapter, I will discuss the major themes I have come across during this study. Beginning with a basic background of the survey respondents, I then explain what parents and teachers think about the importance of parental involvement and preferred methods of communication. I will also reveal what parents and teachers consider appropriate forms of involvement both at school and at home. Finally, I will discuss the characteristics and effects of parental interference.

Respondent Background

In order to gain some basic background information on the respondents, I asked general questions such as the ages and grades of their children. Responses indicate that each parent has between one and four children ranging from kindergarten through eighth

grade. 82.6% of their children are in general education classes while the other 17.4% are in general education classes with in class support and pulled out to resource center classes for one or more subjects. The same 17.4% of parents verified that their children have individual education plans (IEPs) that students who are eligible for special services are required to have, and 48% said “no,” their child does not have an IEP. To my surprise, when asked, “Does your child have an individual education plan (IEP),” 34.8% of parents did not answer the question, or indicated that they do not understand what an IEP is. 58.3% of parents were employed, but only 28.6% of the employed parents were employed full time. The other 57.1% were employed part time.

I also asked the teachers questions about their backgrounds as professional educators. The teacher respondents currently teach in first through fifth grades. 50% of the respondents to this survey teach fifth grade. 83.3% of the teachers teach in general education classes while the remaining 16.7% teach in inclusive or in class support settings. Half of the teachers claim that they do not have any students in their classes with IEPs. The other 50% have between one and 8 students with IEPs, including such classifications as “specific learning disabled,” “auditory processing disabled,” “oppositional defiant behavior,” and speech. The teachers’ experience in the field range from eight to thirty-seven years, with 66.7% of the respondents having over twenty years of teaching experience. Currently, the class sizes range from twenty-two to twenty-seven students.

Importance of Parental Involvement

As indicated in the literature review, parental involvement is a necessity in the classroom. The parents and teachers surveyed for this study reinforced that idea. 100%

of parents and teachers claimed that parental involvement is beneficial. When asked if parental involvement was important, certain parents gave minor conditions on their survey responses such as, “Yes, but not where it smothers or overwhelms the child.”

When asked if their needs as a parent were being met by their child’s teacher, 100% of respondents said yes, although one parent of two elementary school children said, “My second grader’s teacher communicates very well with a monthly newsletter but my fourth grader’s teacher does not.” Even though all of the parents claim they were satisfied with the teachers’ communications with home, 25.6% of parents preferred forms of teacher-parent communication that differed from those forms of communication listed as current strategies used.

Both parents and teachers had thoughts about parental involvement. One parent wrote, “I think that the less communication the better. It means there are no problems.” On the other hand, another parent reported that “weekly, written communication is beneficial because I feel that I am always aware of my child’s strengths and weaknesses.” One teacher noted that “parents can be a teacher’s greatest resource since they know their children better than anyone else. Many are willing to go above and beyond to help out.” Another teacher explained, “Communication is extremely important, but parents can also be very helpful by contributing supplies. Most parents are great and I have no problems with them. Some don’t seem to care at all and once in a while, I get one who goes overboard.” Parental involvement is most crucial in the area of communication between the parents and teachers, but excessive communication can interfere with a teacher’s ability to do her job.

Parent-Teacher Communication

There are several different forms of communication that teachers can use to contact parents and vice versa. When asked what forms of communication teachers are currently using, both parents and teachers reported similar answers. The different forms of communication include report cards and progress reports, assignment books, weekly or monthly newsletters, and websites. The most popular responses were conferences, phone, email, notes, and back-to-school nights. The response percentages can be found in the chart below. Only 4.3% of parents report that their teachers currently utilize back-to-school nights as forms of communication. 16.7% of teachers list back-to-school nights. However, a surprising 21.7% of parents prefer this event to other forms of communication and no teachers chose it. Notice the discrepancy between parents and teachers in relation to back to school nights.

Figure 4
Parent-Teacher Communication

	Parents		Teachers	
	% currently being used in the classroom	% chosen as preferred method	% currently being used in the classroom	% chosen as preferred method
Conferences	47.8%	43%	50%	33%
Phone	65%	43%	83%	50%
Email	52%	34%	83%	66.7%
Notes	47%	13%	33%	16.7%
Back-to-School Night	4.3%	21.7%	16.7%	0%

The chart shows that parents and teachers prefer to conduct their communication using similar methods. Parents seem to prefer in person contact while teachers use telephone and email. Although back-to-school nights ranked relatively high on parents' priority list, teachers do not seem to agree.

Appropriate Involvement

Aside from regular communication between parents and teachers, there are many other things that parents can do to show an interest and be involved in their children's education. Whether parents provide guidance, dependability, or a sense of humor, or listen to their child read and discuss the day's events at home, parents and teachers list many ways that parents appropriately involve themselves in the educational experience. According to parents, the most important thing they can do to help their children is to check and monitor homework. 70% of parents listed homework first when asked what ways can parents be appropriately involved. Teachers did not stress homework as much as the parents with only 33% listing homework; however, it was tied with volunteers in the classroom for the most popular answer among teachers. Parents also consider helping in the actual classroom a priority with 17.4% of respondents mentioning it on their surveys. Additionally, 30% of parents feel that communication with the teacher is an appropriate way to show an interest while 17% of teachers listed contact between parents and teachers as a priority.

One parent reported, "I think parents should always show an interest in their child's schoolwork. Parents should always be aware of their child's progress and/or struggles in school. Parents must be in 'partnership' with school and provide help and

support.” Other popular parent suggestions include knowing the curriculum, informing teachers of things going on outside of school, unpacking the child’s school bag and checking their folders or assignment books, providing an appropriate work environment at home for the child, having daily discussions about school with the child and asking questions of both the students and the teachers. Teachers’ responses include knowing boundaries, reinforcing class procedures, and involving Dad.

Many teachers take advantage of parents as a resource. Parents are usually willing to come into the classroom to read to the students or help with activities, field trips, and parties. Parents have endless life experiences and points of view that they can share with the children. But on the other hand, I wanted to find out how common the practice is of inviting parents to be a part of the lesson or to help out. 81.8% of parents report that their children’s teachers do invite them into the classroom. 77.8% of those parents say that they have, and will continue to, accept the invitation if it is extended to them. Of the 18.2% of respondents who said their children’s teachers do not invite them in to the classroom, 100% said they would like to be asked to help. One parent said, “I think parents helping in the class would help the kids learn better.” Another parent expressed that she wants “to feel comfortable in the place where my child spend most of her time during the week. I want to know that my child’s teacher is accepting of parents coming into the class.” 75% of the teachers surveyed said that they invite parents into their classes a few times a year.

My field notes include an IEP meeting with both the child’s teachers and parents. Both parents attended the meeting and placed full trust in the teachers’ decisions. They asked a few questions, added some background information about their child, and

efficiently worked with the teachers and child study team to develop a plan. These parents are ideal to work with due to their active involvement but relied on the professionals to do their jobs.

Parental Involvement at Home

Monitoring or helping with homework was identified on the survey as the primary way in which a parent can be involved in their child's education. I asked the parents how much time their children spend on homework and how much, if any, help they give their children with their homework. Parents reported that most students, 56.5%, do between thirty and sixty minutes of homework every night, and 52.2% spend less than a half an hour on homework. 26.1% of students do over an hour of homework a night.

95.7% of parents said that they help their children with their homework. Most parents, 60.1%, noted that they only help their child with homework when it is needed. 34.8% said they always help. 4.3% never help, claiming that "they are both straight A students and have never studied." In order to see how involved parents are in their children's homework, I also asked parents if they point out and/or correct mistakes on their children's homework. 95.7% said that they do point out mistakes, but only 33.3% of parents admit to correcting their children's mistakes on their homework. 66.7% claim that they do not correct the mistakes, they only point them out. Correcting mistakes prevents the teachers from seeing a true assessment of particular skills. One parent who points out but does not correct mistakes said, "I think it probably helps the teacher if she knows what the student understands."

Aside from helping with homework, parents need to help enforce school rules. Many parents work part or full time and do not have time for regular contact with the

teacher. But parents can still be involved in the home by helping their children with their homework, reinforcing school rules, and talking to their children about what happens in school during the day, as indicated by the survey responses.

Parental Interference

Through personal experience and the survey results, it becomes evident that some parents with their concern for involvement may actually interfere with daily educational procedures. Frequently, this happens when a parent is a constant presence in the classroom either through daily visits or special requests and voicemail messages that need to be returned. Teachers want to be able to accommodate parents' demands, and will take time away from preparing lessons to meet these parents' needs; however parental interference usually emerges when teachers notice excessive communication and requests.

When asked how often they initiate contact with their child's teacher, the majority of parents, 30.4%, said between one and four times a year, which equals approximately once a marking period. Most of those parents chose to contact the teacher by telephone. 13% of parents replied equally weekly contact, monthly contact and "only when needed." Weekly contact is conducted mostly through email while monthly contact is generally through telephone and notes. 8.7% of the parents claim to initiate contact "very often" split equally between notes and email. None of the parents admit to daily contact with the teacher. Of the twenty-three respondents, most of them, 43.5%, choose to use email. The same numbers of parents, 34.8%, choose to make a phone call or write a note. 4.3% attend conferences as their method of communication.

I asked parents and teachers what topics were covered during communications. Reported topics include questions or concerns, notification of special activities or parties, problems and behavior issues, grades or progress issues, special requests and volunteer requests, and information that might be useful for the parents or teachers to know about individual students. Other topics include field trips, and weekly schedules. One parent admits that her child, “seems to forget a lot and makes up stories.” She contacts the teacher “to get the other side of the story.” Most parent-initiated contact is questions related to school procedures, grades, and homework assignments. Most teacher-initiated contact is regarding academic and behavior problems. All of the most popular responses from parents and teachers for both parent to teacher and teacher to parent communication are charted below.

Figure 5
Topics of Parent-Teacher Communication

	Parents		Teachers	
	Parent-Teacher	Teacher-Parent	Parent-Teacher	Teacher-Parent
Question/Concern	81.8%	18.2%	100%	0%
Special Activities	9.1%	63.6%	25%	25%
Problems/Behavior	27.3%	63.6%	0%	75%
Progress/Grades	18.2%	36.4%	25%	50%
Volunteer/Request	9.1%	27.3%	25%	50%
Informative	36.4%	18.2%	25%	25%

According to both parents and teachers, teachers contact parents most often when there are problems or behavior issues in class. When asked if topics of communication were more often positive or negative, 45.5% of parents replied that it is usually positive while no teachers claimed most contact as positive. 36.4% of parents said it is about equal between positive and negative topics, while 75% of teachers said that both positive and negative topics are covered. 36.4% of parents and 25% of teachers said that communication is usually negative. One parent says, "My son get into trouble a lot in school and so I have contact with his teacher frequently. I think if I heard more about some of the positive things he was doing, and I could praise him for that, his negative behavior would improve."

I was also interested in how long communication between teachers and parents lasts on average. Often, the requests that parents make require significant time from the teacher. In addition, there is the time spent either talking to or writing correspondence to parents. Parents' responses ranged between five and thirty minutes. Teachers' responses ranged between five and fifteen minutes. Most parents, 45.5%, and most teachers, 75%, said that discussions are short, between five and ten minutes. 36.4% of parents and 25% of teachers report that communication lasts between ten and fifteen minutes. 18.2% of parents said that on average, it takes between twenty and thirty minutes to address an issue.

Many parents devote themselves to being a part of the learning environment whether it is through school committees or helping set up the classroom for a party. I was interested to see if there were any similarities between the amount of extra curricular

contributions made by parents and the tendency to be overly involved. Most of the parents, 47.8%, reported that they are on one or fewer committees. The second greatest percentage of responses, 21.7%, was for six or more committees. The other 30.4% of respondents ranged between two and four school related contributions. Aside from the amount of time spent participating outside of the classroom, 56.5% of parents identified themselves as more involved in their child's education than other parents. 37.5% were unsure how they compare to other parents and none of the respondents felt they were less involved than most parents.

66.7% of teachers claimed to have had at least one parent be what they considered to be "too involved." 100% of teachers who made this claim consider these parents a problem. When asked about specific behaviors, teachers' responses included: "daily notes about inconsequential things," phone calls two to three times a day, "hunting me down before and after school," voicemails about "ridiculous" things, parents who make surprise visits in the classroom all year long, and "constant: visits, calls, comments regarding EVERYTHING and every paper."

As noted in the opening vignette, many of the overly involved parents interfere with regular classroom procedures by making special requests. The rate of overly involved parents is low, with teacher respondents claiming to have only one or two parents per year that they consider interfering. Teachers were also asked what kinds of requests these parents were making. Answers include things such as requesting retests when a child did not do well, copies of all assessments done in class; and being in charge of every party, activity, and field trip. One teacher reported:

One mother came in to the classroom or wrote notes a couple of times a week just to update me on what her child did at home. She also asked me to cover certain topics in class that were not part of the curriculum.

According to my field notes, one parent requested that lessons be retaught to the entire class because her child had trouble on the homework. I also took note of the requests for extra homework since she and his father wanted him to do more. These requests for “extras” took time out of my cooperating teacher’s planning time. The teacher wanted to be able to accommodate the parent, but due to time restraints, curriculum restraints, and feasibility, many of the requests were denied. A teacher with a class of twenty-five or more students should not spend time teaching lessons for a second or third time because one or two students did not do well on their homework.

Many parent respondents claimed that they were more involved than other parents. I was interested to see if their children suffered from more stress than other students. Only 17.4% of parents admit to thinking their children feel more pressure than other students, but it is difficult for parents to know for sure what kind of stress their children feel.

Parents who are overly involved in the classroom have an effect on their children’s education. Teachers report that some of the children of parents they identify as interfering display traits such as nervousness and worrying about perfection, being terrified of adults, and being embarrassed. One teacher writes, “the children are under too much pressure at home. I think they are unaware of the phone calls but still suffer under all the pressure.” Another teacher admits, “Sometimes I have trouble teaching the children of these parents because of the association to the parent.” Like the student in the opening vignette, I recorded data about a student in my student teaching placement whose

mother left voicemail messages three to five times a week, demanding special attention from the teacher. The requests were very time consuming and were only to benefit her child. The child was constantly worried about perfection and was afraid to make a mistake. He discussed with the teacher the excessive amount of time he spent doing homework and the little time he spends in play. As a third grader, he is probably unaware of his mother's influence on his and the class's education. All of the reported effects of parental interference on students have negative connotations.

Summary

Based on the literature and the survey results, parental involvement in the classroom is an undeniable advantage to the students. All parents and teachers surveyed agreed that parental involvement is extremely important. The methods of communication between parents and teachers most often used and preferred are conferences, telephone, email, notes, and back to school nights.

Although parents and teachers both think that helping with homework is one of the best ways to participate in their children's education, parents want to be invited into the classroom. They want to feel welcome and comfortable in their children's everyday setting. Back to school nights and invitations to be a part of the learning experience ranked high on parents' priority lists, but not as high on teachers'.

Parents can, and sometimes do, interfere with a teacher's ability to effectively prepare lessons and attend to the needs of all of the students. Based on teachers' surveys, most parental interference is revealed through the amount of contact between the parents and the teachers. The most common reasons for communicating are to ask questions or

report problems. Parents want to hear more about positive things their children are doing and not just when there are problems.

According to the teachers surveyed, overly involved parents are not a frequent occurrence, usually one or two parents a year. Signals that a parent may become an interference include special requests only in the interest of their child and excessive time spent trying to accommodate these requests.

Children of overly involved parents suffer from negative consequences either internally through stress and pressure, or externally when teachers' unintentional biases against certain parents formed.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Implications

This chapter is designed to discuss the findings of the study including an interpretation of the results, the implications, and recommendations for further research. It begins with a review of the problem, followed by my conclusions based on the results of the study, and finally, further questions that were raised as the data was analyzed. This study contributes to the field of teaching because most teachers have to determine the best approach to communicating with all types of parents. Some students suffer negative effects when their parents are not involved at all, but other students also suffer because their parents are *too* involved. Educators need to know what side-effects are possible for children with overly involved, and often interfering parents.

Review of the Problem

Teachers are confined to strict schedules and curriculums while still trying to meet the needs of all children and accommodate parents. Parents can be an important resource for teachers or they can be an interference. The research explains what parents, teachers and students consider appropriate parental involvement including report cards, progress reports, parent-teacher conferences, voicemail, PTO's, homework help, positive reinforcement, and discipline (Barge & Loges, 2003). However, since very little research has been done on what is considered "too much" involvement, I conducted a study by surveying parents and teachers about school involvement, particularly over-involvement. Some of the topics covered in the survey include: appropriate involvement in school, how

parents can be involved at home, different forms of communication between parents and teachers, and different aspects of parental interference. After sending out over three hundred surveys to parents and teachers of one elementary school in New Jersey, only about 10% of subjects responded. This greatly affects the outcome of the study since it is such a small percentage of the population. After conducting a review of the literature, and looking for themes and patterns across all of my data sources, I attempt to answer the question: *Is it possible for some parents to be too involved in their child's education, and if so, what happens to the child?*

Summary of the Findings

Surveys show that both parents and teachers value the idea of parental involvement in school. Parent-teacher communication is an important area of parental involvement. Most parents and teachers prefer contact through conferences, telephone, and email. Surprisingly, parents favor events like back-to-school nights whereas teachers, probably due to the extra time involved, do not value those experiences as much.

Parents want to feel comfortable and welcome in the school environment. Inviting parents into the classroom can be a valuable resource for teachers and can help calm parents' concerns. On the other hand, parents can help their children a great deal without ever setting foot in the classroom. Across the boards, helping with homework was ranked as a good way to be involved appropriately.

Sometimes, parents cross the line of what is considered appropriate involvement. These parents can sometimes interfere with classroom procedures by making excessive contacts with the teacher. Most often, parents communicate with teachers about

questions or concerns, and special requests. Teachers often report the problems to the parents.

Although not usually an overwhelming problem, overly involved parents have children who suffer negative consequences from their parents' behavior. Many of these children are under more stress and feel more pressure than other students.

Interpretation of the Results

The first trend I noticed is not surprising, but it is important in order to confirm that the population with whom I was working is consistent with the literature. In this case, as with all of the prior research, parental involvement is important to both parents and teachers. Parents need to communicate with the teacher as well as help at home.

The second theme I looked at was that of parent-teacher communication. Most of the results followed were what I expected. Most communication is conducted through telephone, email, notes, and conferences. However, I was surprised to see that parents place a high value on events where they are invited into the class such as back-to-school night. I found that parents want to feel comfortable with the environment where their children spend most of their week. I can also see from the teachers' point of view that those types of activities often require them to spend extra hours at work. I think that teachers should try and create other kinds of opportunities for parents to be a part of the learning process. With all of the experiences and varying points of view, parents can promote connections between life and the curriculum.

The focus of the study is revealed in the third theme. Parental interference is a legitimate problem among teachers. Perhaps a more major concern to teachers is getting parents to be *more* involved in education, but another problem exists when parents are

too involved. This study was conducted with a very small population in only one school, but a majority of the teachers express that sometimes parents can be a problem even though they encourage parental involvement. Since most of the time, the problem lies in the time consuming requests and communication from parents, teachers need to develop a plan to accommodate these parents in a way that is beneficial to all students. A weekly newsletter may be a way to satisfy some of the needs that parents have. I think that traditionally teachers are used to contacting parents only when there is a problem and it creates a negative view of parent-teacher communication. If teachers make an effort to communicate more positive things, parents will be more willing to trust the professionals to do their jobs. Some parents will always be concerned with what is going on in the schools, so keeping lines of communication open will make parents feel more relaxed.

In addition to the problem that overly involved parents cause teachers, the children of these parents often suffer negative consequences. Many of the children feel like they are under a lot of pressure to be perfect. They worry more about mistakes and pleasing their parents. It is important to stay objective when a parent is interfering. Teachers need to avoid unintentionally taking out their frustration on the child while trying to accommodate the parent to avoid conflict. Parents need to be aware of the impact they are having on the rest of the students. Teachers are professionals who have a difficult job with many restraints. Parents should be supportive of a teacher's decisions and abilities while avoiding interference. True partnerships between parents and teachers will benefit the students while conflicts will hinder the students.

Recommendations for Further Studies

The area of special education frequently carries misunderstanding and stigmas. One topic that arose while conducting my research was that of educating all parents about school procedures. When I looked at the respondents' backgrounds, I noticed that a surprisingly large percentage of parents do not know what an IEP is since their children do not require special services. Parents of special education students are aware of various services and accommodations that can be made for their children, but they remain ignorant of many special education state and school policies. What if *all* parents were educated about special services and procedures? Studies might be done in this area with the eventual result that prejudice against special education students would be reduced and parents of classified students would be better able to help their children succeed, and a better understanding of all children in the classroom would result.

Another area of interest presented itself when I discovered how important it is for parents to feel welcome in the classroom. Perhaps if parents and teachers had a true "partnership," it would benefit the students. Parents can bring multiple points of view and personal experience to make the curriculum content more relevant to the students. What would be the effect on student learning if parents were made to feel welcome in the classroom? A study could be conducted to find out what kind of impact it would have on the students if parents were a part of the learning process.

I noticed in the survey responses that most teachers are reporting primarily negatively viewed topics to parents. What is the impact of more positive communication between teachers and parents on the students? Perhaps if teachers made the commitment

to notify each parent of one positive thing their child did in school during the week, then parents can praise their child at home, raising their self-esteem.

More studies can be conducted on the effect that parental interference has on students by interviewing and observing students in the classroom setting. More in depth surveys or interviews of parents and teachers will reveal more discrepancies and similarities.

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